Never mind the translation

Article for International Journal, *Art in Translation* (Special Issue on Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea), Feb 2019.

Never Mind The Translation: Tong Yang-tze's Art of Writing in Dialogical Perspective

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Abstract
In her calligraphic work, Tong Yang-tze (Dong Yangzi 董陽孜, 1942-) aims to break away from narrative tradition and to open up new modes of looking. Her collaborations with artists, Jazz musicians, dancers, fashion designers, film, pop music industry and architects, have led to multi-sensual experiences. Her intentionally abstracted writing also provides an opportunity for people unable to read Chinese to translate the writing, to surpass linguistic and cultural barriers. While spontaneity is emphasised, my paper sees her intention of creating calligraphy with cross-threshold media from a dialogical perspective: her work aims to challenge traditional perceptions and practice, in quest of contemporaneity and postvisuality of her art of writing.

Keywords: Tong Yang-tze, contemporary calligraphy, art of writing, cross-threshold art, post-1970s' Taiwanese art, dialogical perspective, postvisuality.

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> The art of calligraphy is also the interpretation of calligraphy
> It translates the heart
> And the magnificence and wonder of a heart's planning
>
> Hui-Chih Hsu "Calligraphy is Dangerous – Yang-tze Tong,
> after viewing 'X Beyond 0: Calligraphy – Sign – Space'"[1]

The nature of writing relies on its textual meaning. Words can be read as symbols conveying ideas and emotion, and calligraphy has long been regarded as the visual representation of words. Through the process of bodily movements, the form of calligraphic work conveys ideas derived from mind; through the visual expressions of ink, calligraphy also connects writers to their viewers. 'To read' the content that has been transcribed through writing became a part of such visual exercise itself and a pathway to comprehend the work.

In recent years, Tong Yang-tze's (Dong Yangzi 董陽孜, b. 1942) calligraphic work aims to break away from such narrative tradition, and has opened up new modes of looking. Her collaborations with artists, Jazz musicians, dancers, fashion designers, film, pop music industry and architects, have led to multi-sensual experiences. Her intentionally abstracted writing also provides an opportunity for people unable to read Chinese to comprehend the writing as another form of art, to surpass the linguistic and cultural barriers. On one hand, it gives a refreshing new look to a traditional art form like calligraphy by making it more accessible along with other popular contemporary art and trends. On the other hand, when calligraphic writing has no literary content and requires no literacy nor any apprehension of the content written, we might question what then the 'writing' means? Does Tong's practice change the nature of calligraphy? How should we position such contemporary calligraphy work within the global art and its context? When calligraphy requires no translation for Western viewers, can we simply categorize such artistic form into abstract ink art in the Western perspective? While spontaneity is emphasized and the practicality of calligraphy has been replaced by the need of an artistic expression, my paper sees Tong Yang-tze's intention of creating calligraphy with cross-threshold media from a dialogical perspective; her work aims to challenge the traditional perception and practice, in quest of contemporaneity and postvisuality. This paper will first discuss the current situations of calligraphy in Taiwan and Tong's artistic claims, followed by the debates aroused by the calligraphic work when text appears as form alone.

Meaningful Writing

Born in Shanghai, Tong Yang-tze's parents brought her and her younger brother to Taiwan through Hong Kong in 1952. Growing up in the post-war period when a lack of material goods was often compensated by spiritual food and simple delight in life, at the age of 10, Tong's father gave her Yen Zhenqing's (顏真卿, 709-785) writing, *Record of the Altar of the Goddess Magu* (麻姑仙壇記) as a model book for calligraphy, since then she began to pick up her brush after school with joy and showed a strong love for calligraphy[2]. For her, practising calligraphy in quietude is like going to the cinema or having ice cream, a real life's luxury. Like many Chinese calligraphers and painters, Tong began her learning with copying masters' works. Reading and imitating the style of the great Tang dynasty calligrapher Yen Zhenqing offered her a deep joy and occupied a major place in Tong's childhood. According to her own statement, she enjoyed practising everyday 200 small

characters and 100 larger characters of standard script during the school breaks. After being acquainted with Yen's forceful style in standard script, she was introduced to Wen Zhengming's (文徵明, 1470-1559) writing of elegant and controlled small characters. But she still was much in favour of the bluntness and fullness of Yen's writing[3].

Failing to obtain a sufficient grade to study architecture at her first attempt at the National University Entrance Exam, a family friend, Xie Bingying (謝冰瑩, 1906-2000)saw her talent in writing and painting, and encouraged her to study Fine Art at the National Normal University in Taipei. During her university years, Zhang Longyan (張隆延, 1909-2009) inspired her to study rubbings from Han, Wei and Six Dynasties steles. The edgily framed, knife-cut style of clerical script in *Stele of Zhang Qian* (張遷碑, 186 A.D.) was Tong's favourite. In addition to learning clerical and standard scripts, Fu Shen (傅申, b. 1937) also urged her to learn from Song calligraphers; hence she showed a keen interest in Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101) and Huang Tingjian's (黃庭堅, 1045-1105) styles. The free and spontaneous movement in Su and Huang's running script helped Tong to liberate herself from the strictly structured and carefully positioned style of Yan Zhenqing and pre-Tang texts[4].

By her last year at the National Normal University, Tong Yang-tze had won many major prizes with her talent in calligraphy; she was awarded the 'Gold Medal' and "Excellence Medal" in the Sino-Japanese Goodwill Calligraphy Exhibition in Japan (1959 and 1960), the 'Gold Medal' at the Fifth National Students' Calligraphy Exhibition in Japan (1963), "Honourable Mention" at the International Women's Club Art Contest (1963) and the "First Prize Winner" of the same contest in 1964 to 1966. After one year teaching at the Taipei First Girls' High School, in 1967, Tong Yang-tze was awarded a one-year scholarship from Brooklyn Museum Art School in New York to study oil painting. In 1970 she received a MFA degree from the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Massachusetts and had her first oil painting exhibition at the University. In 1972, she was the winner of magazine cover design at the "Creativity '71" in the American National Exhibition of Commercial Art. While it looked, after five years living in the States, as if she had drifted away from classical Chinese art, Tong returned to Taipei in 1973 and had her first solo exhibition of calligraphy at the Leland Gallery of Art, and a group exhibition "Exhibition of Five Chinese Calligraphers" at the National Museum of History in Taiwan.[5]

During her education in Taiwan and the States, Tong had more opportunities to explore other expressions in Western painting, sculpture, watercolours and graphic design. She was rather confused by the practice of making copying and imitating masters' work in Chinese painting and calligraphy, suggested by the university's teaching curriculum in Taiwan as a way to achieve technical perfection[6]. For centuries, writing has been an exercise of character-modelling, that is to learn about the classical techniques, to copy and to reproduce the masterpieces from the past, then one would possibly be able to find new idioms in one's own way. To be skilled in art of calligraphy requires long hours of practice and emotional strength in order to coordinate one's mind and bodily

movement. While ink and brush provided the artist with the tools for expression, writing itself is a lonely process. Characters are a disciplined means for communication, on the contrary, ink releases one from the limitation of writing; a calligraphic work is both visual and literary. How to surpass the previous calligraphy masters, as well as to inject a new life into an art form with a long history, set roles and an established aesthetic system were constantly in Tong's thoughts[7]. If the calligraphy is one's life form, a self-manifestation of heart and emotions of the artist, with the ink and brush, calligraphy should deliver the sense of time and space, rational thinking and sentiment through its aesthetic representation of the words, that is beyond copying and imitating others.

In Tong's first publication of her collected work in 1973, she displayed a great maturity in calligraphy and her wishful thinking. Her writing is eloquent and powerful. By mixing different styles of standard, clerical, running and semi-cursive scripts into one scroll, as seen in Tong's *Looking at Mountains by Du Fu* (杜甫.望嶽, 1972), it conveyed her technical command as a result of practising Yen Zhenqing's *A Poem to General Tang Pei* (裴將軍詩, Southern Song rubbing, printed by Zhongyitang 南宋忠義堂本, Zhejiang Provincial Museum). In *Combination of [Clerical and Cursive] Styles* (隸草合幅, 1973, Fig. 1), Tong wrote the characters *wu wei* 無為 in clerical and cursive styles, separated by a long inscription in running script sprinting in the middle. While the two characters are intentionally written separately to represent two sets of ideas, Tong's inscription explains why she thinks people nowadays mistake the two characters, *wuwei*, as one word, referring to "inaction" only. She further discussed *Huainanzi*'s definition of *wu wei* as "inaction but action in everything" (無為而無不為) that these two characters actually convey two sets of concepts: such a duality is the essence of *Dao*[8]. This example also points to Tong's learning, not only in calligraphic expression, but also in her understanding of texts that have often come from Chinese Classics or poetry. Tong stated herself that she writes only the text that moves her[9]. It means that as she writes, she expresses her knowledge, feeling and personality through both the text she chooses to write and her artistic expression. As a result, both of the important elements, text and calligraphic style, correspond to each other in her work, which creates a 'meaningful' art in writing, to herself and to her audience. The first dialogue is between the classical text and the artist herself, and she then conveys through her writing that another dialogue is established between her reader and the forms of writing she adopts.

The other profound change in her work of 1973 is her emphasis on format and special arrangement. Composing on a square paper, seven unevenly sized characters, "Yige xianren tiandi jian 一個閑人天地間" (Someone Wandering between Heaven and Earth) are arranged in two clusters on the right and left in her work, *Running Script* (行書, 1973, Fig. 2)[10]. Above the characters is a red square that mimics the outline of a seal, and two blue and brown colour washes flowing in and out of the square like a riverbank scene. In this work, Tong gave up the traditional hanging and handscrolls, and the popular couplet format, and instead took on the most unconventional form, the square, for her calligraphy. What she aims to achieve is a balance, not by arranging characters vertically in a row in a controlled manner, but by spacing one or two

characters in a row and spreading them out horizontally, parallel with the two slanting colour washes on the top. While the colour washes flow in and out of the red frame, the text "Yige xianren tiandi jian" is in fact a line taken from a banned novel, *Gelian huaying* (隔簾花影, Shadow of flowers seen through a curtain), the opening poem in chapter 19. This book is a revision on Ding Yaokang's (丁耀亢, 1599-1669) infamous *Xu Jinpingmei* (金瓶梅, Continuation of *The Golden Lotus*), published in the Kangxi period of Qing (康熙, 1662-1722)[11]. The highly tabooed text of the past and the breaking out of the red frame seem to suggest Tong's intention to flout the traditional rules in the Chinese art system.

Such an approach also can be seen in her work *Cursive Script* (草書, 1973, Fig. 3), with characters *zhongxin wuwai* (縱心物外, Aloof from Worldly Things), where the character *xin* 心 (heart) breaks into (or out of) the red square[12]. The disproportionate size of the first character adds weight, and the turning and swirling of Tong's brush brings energy as well as different degrees of tonality to enrich this seemingly colourless medium of black ink and white paper. Tong's ambition to revolutionize the traditional treatment of calligraphy was ardent. It echoes what Tong felt at that time: "To develop a new life from a long and profound historical art is not easy. Yet art can only become creation by being injected with new life. Therefore, difficult as the job certainly is, it is still in this direction I have been groping"[13].

A Dialogue Within

Her work in the late 1970s showed a strong emphasis on the composition of characters to reach a formal beauty, her works in 1980s began to break from traditional calligraphy and to seek for a new expression. She experimented with 4-sheet format, each sheet 138 cm high and 63.5 cm wide, as seen in *Riding the Long Wind, Breaking the Endless Waves* (乘長風破萬里浪, 1991, Fig. 4) in semi-cursive script[14]. By placing four pieces of paper on the floor in her studio, each character either sits inside or extends to the next paper, it allows the characters to extend and to loosen structures, and to express more freely the hand movements and her thoughts. As commented Roderick Whitfield, it's noticeable that the active verbs in this phrase (**Riding** the long wind, **Breaking** the endless waves) are also the ones that ride or break across from one sheet to the next; particularly the character *po* (破, breaking) that extends across three sheets. Conversely, the nominal characters are almost entirely contained within sheets 2 and 4; only a tiny part of *feng* (風, wind) strays onto the adjoining sheet, almost as if by accident. The use of extra large size to convey dominant characters is not new, such as the character *zhan* (戰, fight) in Mi Fu's (米芾, 1051-1107) *Sailing on the Wu River* (吳江舟中詩) in the Crawford collection, but choosing a four-sheet format and then confounding expectations by transgressing the edges of each sheet is something new and radical[15]. What Tong does not want is to 'copy' words from poems or the Classics or to write without emotion or any meaning of the text. For her, how to make a calligraphic writing meaningful is to properly convey what a calligrapher reads from the text, then through the hand movements, a careful planning, and many times of practice, the feelings and interpretations of the text that the calligrapher had could be shared through the writing. So calligraphy is, as in traditional

practice, perhaps closer to painting a landscape, becoming a mean of conveying ideas and emotions; it is also an expressive tool of the 'subjective beauty' from someone to someone. The process of writing is absolutely personal, and the result of this artistic reading is unique.

In the 1990s, Tong Yang-tze furthered the idea "One composes in the mind beyond the paper; a full character extends beyond the vision's limit" (胸無全紙，目無全字), her writing became gigantic and wilder, and seemingly unreadable. The art critics considered Tong's work a destruction of tradition with her de-structured calligraphy, writing that is closer to abstract ink painting. In this aspect, Tong is often questioned whether her take on calligraphic presentation is influenced by the *boku shuo* (墨象, ぼくしょう), a term promoted around 1957 by Japanese Avant Garde calligraphers, inspired by action painting and gestural abstraction? By de-structuring the text and emphasis on pressing the ink, fluent brushwork, and the void in their work, the calligraphy became a pure art form and departed from the traditional concept. Han Pao-teh (漢寶德, 1934-2014) also commented that Tong's works became more and more difficult to read with time as the characters fall apart and the lines and strokes seem to have their own lives that break the boundaries and framework of the past. It feels as if Tong de-structures the text first and rearranges the characters on her work: although the characters remain the same, and ink and brushwork are preserved as in traditional calligraphy, the idea of drawing seems to override the writing[16].

In Tong's view, the response to the de-structured look and the expression of life-like body in the gigantic writing is such that the whole body is crystallized into the movement of writing, in similar language to action painting, inspired by her training in America. Yet the way she writes still follows a strict rule in traditional calligraphy, that is one stroke after another in order, and although the expression seems to be free, the structure remains intact and persistent[17]. When the characters are gigantic, they become rather compelling, because although the meaning of the words is still apparent to a Chinese reader, the artistic expression of a seemingly de-structured character comes at you. Like the power conveyed through a de-structured architectural space, the first thing one sees is the space, then you recognise slowly the pieces, the columns and beams and what this building was for. The audience first is attracted by the 'picture', then gradually identifies each stroke and its meaning, which is a reversal of the traditional way of reading calligraphy. She distances the words from their meaning, literary quality, elite tradition and the Chinese cultural context by making the written characters unfamiliar to her audience. By doing so, the re-arranged composition of calligraphy enables the artist to live, to be more visible, and to become a creator of text, not just someone writing characters.

As shown in an eight-sheet work, *The Mountain Rain is about to Fall; the Wind Swirls about Everywhere in the Pavilion* (山雨欲來風滿樓, 2006, Fig. 5), a line from a poem by the Tang poet Xu Hun (許渾, c. 788-860), the combination of wet ink brushwork and flying white brings about energy and rhythmical movement into her work. The strong contrast between the tonality of the first character *shan* (山, mountain) and the fifth *feng* (wind) indicates the nature of the object as

well as the blowing wind, the character *man* (滿, fills) is written in the same pale ink, and is then overwritten by the character *lou* (樓, pavilion): it is as if the wind were indeed insubstantial and blowing right into the building. The suggestion of the text is something dangerous, a war or a conflict, is about to happen. In Tong's interpretation, she takes a stance like the poet, standing on the pavilion in a high place looking down at the land and the city, and their association with historical events; history itself is full of up and downs like hovering in the swirling wind and untiring rain, the conflicts are in the past and might come back again, but one remains physically safe, unmoved, still, unaffected with objectivity, inside a sheltered pavilion, bringing us back to the present time and place. Hence the distorted characters in the middle serve to emphasise the meaning of the words, as well as the artist's interpretation. Every work is loyal to the original text Tong took from the traditional literature and philosophy, so that her written calligraphy is still literally meaningful, yet each word is also the artist's self-expression.

It is also worth noting that Tong used to write onto the paper laid on floor for larger pieces. The way she arranges the writing is rather interesting and to some extent incredible. Her studio in Taipei is located in one of the busiest and most densely populated areas, hence is not spacious like most contemporary Chinese artists' studios on an almost industrial-estate scale (cf. Gu Wenda 谷文達 and Xu Bing 徐冰). Each time she can lay a maximum of six sheets of 4-*chi* (尺) paper (each 138 x 63.5 cm) on the floor, taking up sheets to dry on the wall and adding additional sheets as needed, with no break during the writing, until all eight or fifty-six sheets are completed, otherwise the *qi* (氣), energy, would be disrupted.

One might wonder how she could continue the energy and forceful brushwork with such limitations on her physical movement in such a confined studio space? To achieve a satisfactory final work requires careful planning and numerous drafts: Tong draws a sketch no more than 10 cm wide or even smaller, and in her mind she visualizes this on the whole eight sheets, about 15-18 times larger than the sketch (Figs. 6-7). With many months practice and many versions, she can finally produce works that she is happy with. Only when the final eight or fifty-six sheets of work have been displayed in the museum space, would she first see the complete work! Because she is a private person, she seldom allows people, including collectors, museum curators or art critics to visit her studio, which is literally a room in her home, she says most of people writing about her art would imagine her working in a spacious space, but they have no idea how her works have been produced. In my recent visit to her home, Tong explained the process and joked about her work as a total *tilihuo* (體力活, physical activity) with no other people assisting her, and she is 76 years old. She holds the heavy brush made of goat hair (tailor-made for her, it weighs at least five kg not including an extendable bamboo handle) with her right hand – she always utilizes the brush in *zhongfeng* (中鋒, centred brushwork, Fig. 8) –and holds a bowl of ink in her left hand. It requires a high degree of physical strength, and of course it led to long-term injuries to her left wrist and her right arm.

Like a ritual, Tong insists on new 'mounting' each time for her work: so in each exhibition before the opening, there will be a skilled master-calligraphy-mounter unrolling Tong's works on paper and mounting them onto panels and supporting boards before they are hung. After the exhibition, the works are dismounted from the display boards. This procedure becomes a ceremonial performance, which the audience can witness during the installation.

Is Calligraphy a Part of Contemporary Art?

As time progresses, Tong has stopped creating her own texts, and drawn instead on the distant classical past: on the one hand she is hiding her private life and thoughts through the calligraphy by writing in others' words; on the other hand, the visibility of the artist's presence became even stronger than before. Perhaps it is more of her personal preference that she prefers to express herself through writing than communicating with people. For her, each word contains an infinite space that she can dwell inside and have dialogues with through ink and brush[18].

This may be also why she did not join any calligraphy society or art associations, nor did she participate in any art movement like many of her contemporaries in Taiwan. Taking Taiwan Zhongguo shufa xiehui (臺灣中國書法協會, Taiwan Chinese Calligraphy Society, TCCS) as example, established in 1962 with the leadership of Yu Youren (于右任, 1879-1964) and the support of high profile Nationalist Party members and officials, namely Ma Shouhua (馬壽華, 1893-1977), Wang Zhuangwei (王壯為, 1909-1998), Cao Qiupu (曹秋圃, 1895-1994), Liu Yantao (劉延濤, 1908-2001) and Li Chaozai (李超哉, 1906-2003), and forty-two members from both the immigrant Chinese and the local Taiwanese calligraphers, the TCCS was the first formally registered calligraphy society in Taiwan. Before 1989, the TCCS was influential and dominant, regularly, those Taiwanese calligraphers would gather regularly and write on the spot or compose joint work as a way to socialise with their friends and clients. They would also exhibit, or in this sense display, the work in rows in local cultural centres, not so much in a contemporary curatorial fashion. They also travelled together as a group to represent Taiwan, and organise joint exhibitions with Japanese calligraphers[19].

After the lifting of martial law in 1989, people have had more freedom to form their own societies, and that encouraged an increase of many small communities and calligraphy societies, yet it also weakened the centralization of the TCCS influence and activities over almost four decades. With the changing political climate in the new millennium, the TCCS also has developed a close relationship with the Zhongguo wenlian (中國文聯, Chinese Literary Society). It is worth noting that the exhibitions are organised in regional institutes or art centres, for instance, in 2015, the TCCS organised the 35th annual members' exhibition at the Cuixi Gallery of the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall (國父紀念館翠溪藝廊)[20]. It exhibited 235 works by 235 calligraphers, due to the limitations of space, each member could only submit the couplets in around 4-*chi* format (c. 138 x

63.5 cm, for example Li Gumo 李轂摩, *Couplet*, 2014). The exhibits, in styles ranging from oracle-bone, greater seal, lesser seal, clerical, standard, running and cursive scripts, are randomly arranged, neither in chronological nor in thematic order. The members of the society see calligraphy as self-cultivation and as a spontaneous practice that encourages individual and collective socialisation. The Nationalist politicians also see this society as a vehicle to promote their party's agenda and to support their candidates at elections.

As Neo-Dada, Conceptual Art and Feminist Art emerged in the 1970s, right in the middle of the flourishing of Postmodern Art Movements, Taiwan established its first fine art museum dedicated to exhibiting modern and contemporary art, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, in 1983; with its promotion of postmodern art, in turn, the 1980s also marked a new wave of Postmodern art in Taiwan in all areas of fine arts. The Taipei Fine Art Museum also published its policy that it would not exhibit or collect 'traditional calligraphy' which angered the ink painters and calligraphers. Many calligraphers on the one hand found themselves disgruntled with traditional approaches toward calligraphy; on the other hand, they found no place for their calligraphy in 'contemporary art'. In order to position themselves as well as their calligraphic practice in the context of contemporary art, young calligraphers began to seek new expressions in ink.

Mochaohui (墨潮會), the Ink-Trend Association, established in 1976, is led by Xu Yung-chin (Xu Yongjin 徐永進, b. 1951), Chen Minggui (陳明貴, b.1956), Zhang Jianfu (張建富, b. 1956), Liao Cancheng (廖燦誠, b. 1950), Yang Ziyun (楊子雲, b. 1954), Lien Desen (連德森, b. 1956), Zheng Huimei (鄭惠美, b. 1956) and Cai Mingcan (蔡明讚, b. 1956). Aiming at "Deepening [the understanding of] the tradition [of calligraphy] and investigating [the possibilities in its place within] contemporary [art]" (深入傳統、探索現代), its members were famed for being brave and cutting-edge in expressing their messages in politics and art, and labelled their work as *xiandai shuyi* (現代書藝, calligraphic art of modern manner) and being *qianwei* (前衛, Avant-garde/forward looking). Even before the lifting of Martial Law, Zhang Jianfu's *The Wall Graffiti of the Jiangnan Incident* (江南命案壁書, 1985) was written in bold red and black ink with the strong language and political propagandistic slogans, to protest against political censorship in art and literature. This work was banned from the Avant-Garde Calligraphy Exhibition at the Taipei Fine Art Museum[21]. In a meeting on 29th March 1991, the Ink-Trend Association members were not content with the fallen state of calligraphy in Taiwan's art movements, they sought to break away from the empty talks over dinner gatherings and superficial socialising events led by most of the calligraphy and painting societies in Taiwan, and wished to change the role of calligraphers in its contemporary society[22]. They further took calligraphy to the street, in a performance art on 8th August 1993 outside the Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall, four artists performed *We Grew Up Drinking the Milk of Traditional Calligraphy* (我們都是喝傳統書法奶水長大的), four members wore the calligraphy hat and clothes and drank milk from bottles like babies. So what would happen after they all became skilled in traditional calligraphy (after drinking up the milk of traditional calligraphy)? For them the future of calligraphy in Taiwan remained a question. Is calligraphy a

contemporary art, or it is an art form belonging to the past? Zheng Huimei's *Tie Up Taiwan for 40 Years* (綑綁台灣四十年, 1993) writes the text from a household song *Song of Counterattack and Reinstatement* (反攻復國歌) of the 1950s' Taiwan onto bamboo strips, and each strip is bound with cotton string. With the extended line in clerical script on its restricted format, it refers to the history of finding the peasants' voices found in Han dynasty bamboo strips; discoveries that made the political propaganda, such as 'Longevity of the Republic of China, Long Long Long Longevity…" written to voice the peasants, appear absurd and ridiculous. In Hsu Yung-chin's calligraphic installation work, *Bitter Passage to Taiwan* (渡台悲歌, 1993), he took the poem written by an anonymous Qing Hakkanese immigrant-poet of the same title: "Listen to my word, sir, and do not cross the strait to Taiwan, Taiwan is like a Gateway to Hell. Thousands of people went and no one returned, no one knows whether they are alive or dead. (勸君切莫過台灣，台灣恰似鬼門關。千個人去無人轉，知生知死誰都難)[23]." Along with the calligraphy on white paper, Hsu tore the red cloth into strips, appending them next to each character; they read like punctuation, like blood drops, or like tears. *Hsu's Nomadic, Adventurous, Wild* (漂泊.闖蕩.狂飆, 1996, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.) extends the sentiment of Taiwan's diaspora for both people and art; it captures the confusion, mood and rebellious spirit of post-war calligraphy in Taiwan at the time. Caring about society, economics, and politics, the Ink-Trend Association artists have a strong voice and are confident in their messages. Their art reflects a strong concern for local as well as global issues.

After the 1990s, the calligraphy movements gradually shifted their concern from politics to re-positioning calligraphy in contemporary art; they sought to collaborate with multi-media in creating new languages for their art[24]. Various artists, including Tong Yang-tze, experimented with formal revolution by introducing conceptual art, painterly touches, new media, land art, conceptual photography, installation and performance art into their calligraphic creations. They embrace both the culture's past and present identity by exploring various dimensions.

Meaning of the Meaningless: When Calligraphy Needs No Translation

For Tong Yang-tze, her practice is more lonely and self-critical; she never participated in any public political protest on the street, nor could she see calligraphers as the pushing hands of political body or social commentary. She creates her work solely in her studio, never wishing to make her calligraphy in public as a 'performance art' or her bodily movement as a 'statement': those are something she is strongly fighting against. For her, after many drafts only the 'best one' can be shown to others, and the rest would be destroyed; and each stroke and each dot is her inner dialogue with the written words, serving as her guideline and motto of life, and for her individual emotional expression[25].

Tong was never considered traditional, and her writing can be seen on numerous posters of contemporary dance and theatre, such as her writing for the Cloud Dance Company. She had the

solo exhibition at the Taipei Fine Art Museum (TFAM) for the first time in 1994, and in 2004, she brought a collaborative project "Realm of Feeling: A Dialogue between Calligraphy and Space" (Fig. 9) with the architect Ray Chen (Chen Ruixian 陳瑞憲) to the TFAM. That's the beginning of her cross-threshold experiments. And in 2009, she collaborated with nine architects to recreate *X beyond* 0, finding an unforeseeable calligraphy in each architectural design, for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei. Improvised from nine sets of *wu* (無) phrases, nothingness, serenade, non-discriminating *Nirvikalpa*, spaceless, mute scholar, non-duality and absolutism were discussed through the idea of "nine voids and one existence" (九無一有). Although such conversion of calligraphy became very popular among audience, the ultimate aim of the exhibition was to show calligraphy as the 'useful' art that has not broken away from our time and space, instead of leaving room for imagination; the role of calligraphy was inevitably sidelined amidst the architectural design.

Her installation project on a large scale, *Silent Symphony, Musical Calligraphy* (無聲的樂章, 2011, Fig. 10), further challenges the field of calligraphy and her audience. She cut through the 'unwanted' drafts of gigantic writings, and re-mounted them randomly into 100 pieces. Those pieces can be mounted onto and dismounted from panels, and each time, the panels can be reassembled into various shapes and forms of display, it also leaves space for further collaboration between herself and artists from different fields. Because of the new connections with various media, the interrupted, meaningless form of her 'calligraphy' work ironically gave the calligraphy a new freedom. Calligraphy no longer belongs to the art of the educated Chinese readers. When no one can read the text, everyone can read it. It is rather inexplicable to think that her disrupted meaningless drafts are considered to be more 'contemporary' than the final two-dimensional work.

And even more, Tong gathered some funding from her wealthy friends and commissioned six young fashion designers to work with her calligraphy. In this project *From Ink to Apparel I and II: Fashion Show + Exhibition* (讀衣, Taipei, 2016 and 2017), each designer was assigned to a calligraphy piece from the "Silent Symphony, Musical Calligraphy" as his/her main source of inspiration. Each of them came up with fancy patterns or re-created the words into their dress. While the intention is to explore the possibilities of calligraphy beyond the digital representation, land art and many other forms that have been previously experimented with by various artists, somehow the words are not words and calligraphy is not calligraphy, they became pictures, reassembled and reinterpreted into decorative patterns.

Behind each finished work, there were numerous drafts. It has always been a self-struggle when she had to decide what was the best work to keep. While facing the large body of 'unwanted drafts,' she recently had the idea of dipping them into the bucket of water, after which she got the papers out and squeezed them into the shape of a rock. And this is for her future project, all those unsuccessful calligraphy works made into rock-like objects, named "vanishing words". The process of selecting one of them to become the 'final work' is challenging and the decision could be her

personal preference, as the difference between each work might be minimal. The fate of these works is almost the same as that of human beings, in which an instant of objectivity or subjective judgment could take life in an utterly unanticipated turn.

While the 'unseen words' sit in silence in Tong's studio, they evidence an artist's progress in dialogical perspective, but more of this to me, is the invisibility of calligraphy in our contemporary society. In this digital era, how to sustain an art in danger is constantly in Tong's thoughts. When the calligraphy has to change its form, media, its 'hand-ink-brush' practice and even making its literary content invisible in order to be contemporary calligraphy, does translation really matter?

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[1] The original Chinese text is "書藝也是書藝，轉譯了心，心中規劃的壯闊與美麗," translated by Griffith Chen. See Hsu Hui-Chih 許悔之, "書法是危險的—董陽孜《無中生有—書法˙符號˙空間》集體跨界展演觀後 (Calligraphy is Dangerous – Yang-tze Tong, after viewing 'X Beyond 0: Calligraphy – Sign – Space'), in Jui-Jen Shih 石瑞仁 ed., *X Beyond 0: Calligraphy – Sign – Space* (Taipei: Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei, 2009), 21.
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[3] Tong Yang-tze, "Preface," in *Grace Yang-tze Tong* (Taipei: Grace Yang-tze Tong, 1973), 7.
[4] Lin Mingyong, "Tong Yang-tze de shuxue lichen ji chuangzuo linian," 43.
[5] Tong Yang-tze, "Chronology of Grace Yang-tze Tong," *Grace Yang-tze Tong*, 1973, 2-3.
[6] *Ibid*., 43.
[7] Tong Yang-tze, "Preface," *Grace Yang-tze Tong*, 1973, 7.
[8] The Chinese title of this work is "Licao hefu 隸草合幅" which should be translated as "Combination of Clerical and Cursive Script-styles", but here I adopt the English title in the original publication. Tong Yang-tze, "Combination of Styles," *Grace Yang-tze Tong*, 1973, 11.

[9] Conversation between the author and Tong Yang-tze, 2 September 2017.
[10] Tong Yang-tze, "The Running Script," *Grace Yang-tze Tong*, 1973, 23.
[11] Anonymous, *Gelian huaying* 隔簾花影 (Shadow of flowers seen through a curtain), the opening poem in chapter 19. (http://open-lit.com/listbook.php?cid=19&gbid=427&bid=17204&start=0, accessed 5 October 2017). See also Xiaoqiao Ling, "Crafting a Book: The Sequel to The Plum in the Golden Vase," *East Asian Publishing and Society*, volume 3, issue 2 (2013): 115 – 152.
[12] Tong Yang-tze, "The Cursive Script," in *Grace Yang-tze Tong*, 1973, 30. The four characters are *zongxin wuwai* 縱心物外 (Aloof from worldly things), taken from Zhang Heng's 張衡 (78-139) "Guitianfu 歸田賦" (Rhapsody on Returning to the Fields) of the Han dynasty.
[13] Tong Yang-tze, "Preface," *Grace Yang-tze Tong*, 1973, 7.
[14] Lin Mingyong, "Tong Yang-tze de shuxue lichen ji chuangzuo linian," 36.
[15] Fu Shen, *Traces of the Brush-Studies in Chinese Calligraphy* (New Heaven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1977), 100. My thanks to Prof. Roderick Whitfield for pointing this out to me.
[16] Han Pao-Teh 漢寶德, "Shu zhong you hua – tan Tong Yang-tze de xiandai shufa 書中有畫- 談董陽孜的現代書法" (Within Calligraphy There Is Painting – Discussion on Tong Yang-tze's Modern Calligraphy), *Lianhe bao* 聯合報, 28-29 October 1994, 37; National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, ed., *Tong Yang-tze shuyi* 董陽孜書藝 (Calligraphy Art of Tong Yang-tze) (Taichung: National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 28.
[17] Xiao Xiao 蕭蕭, "Wenzi shuxie shi de jiyi yu yiwang: Tong Yang-tze vs. Wang Mo-Lin 文字書寫史的記憶與遺忘: 董陽孜 vs. 王墨林" (Memory and Forgetting in the History of Writing Calligraphy: Tong Yang –Tze vs. Wang Mo-Lin), *Yishu guandian* 藝術觀點, no. 34 (2008: 4), 63 and 71.
[18] Xiao Xiao 蕭蕭, "Wenzi shuxie shi de jiyi yu yiwang: Tong Yang-tze vs. Wang Mo-Lin," 66.
[19] See society report in each issue of *Zhongguo shufa* 中國書法 (Chinese Calligraphy), the bulletin of Taiwan Zhongguo shufa xiehui kanwu 臺灣中國書法協會 (Taiwan Chinese Calligraphy Society), issue nos. 1-83, 1995 to present. (http://www.ccs.org.tw/index_ad_2.php?topic_id=6&Type=1, accessed 2 July, 2018)
[20] Exhibition catalogue, *Chihao zuimo: Zhongguo shufa xuehui di sanshiwu ci huiyuanzhan zhuanji* 馳毫醉墨: 中國書法學會第三十五次會員展專輯 (Galloping Brush and Drunken Ink: The TCCS publication of the 35th members' exhibition), Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Taipei, 10-25th September 2015. (http://www.ccs.org.tw/index_ad.php?topic_id=6&main_id=169&title_id=35&ad_id=252, accessed 16 October 2017).
[21] Cheng Fang-Ho 鄭芳和, "Beyond 書法帝國邊緣:台灣第三空間的差異書寫" (Beyond calligraphy at the edge of empires: creating the third space for Taiwan's unique culture), edited in 2011 漢字藝術節-兩岸當代書法學術研討會論文集, Taipei: Zhonghua wenhua zonghui 中華文化總會, 2011, 211-212.
[22] Cai Mingzan 蔡明讚, "'Mochaohui' huodong jiyao「墨潮會」活動記要," in Zhang Jianfu 張建富 et al eds., *Xiandai shuyi* 現代書藝 (Calligraphic Art of Modern Manner) (Taipei: Mochaohui 墨

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[23] Zhang Shumei 張淑美 ed., *Taiwan lishi gushi* (2*) - pijing zhanji de shidai, 1683-1732*) 台灣歷史故事(2) - 披荊斬棘的時代 1683-1732 (History and Stories of Taiwan (2) - Break Open a Way through Brambles and Thistles) (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe 聯經出版社, 1996), 8-9.

[24] For instance, in 2011, Hsu made another artistic breakthrough when he began mixing calligraphy with digital media. Digital media produces and captures images that are unaffected by time. Moving with the changing light and drum beats played by the U Theatre (優人神鼓), the digital projection of calligraphy in Hsu's *Taiwan Dream* 台灣生命力 (2011). Hsu Yung-chin's *Taiwan Dream* is a 180 Degree Panoramic Theatre, fully charged and ornate, roaming through nature and humanitarian incidents, representing the work as Taiwan's history in motion.

[25] Personal conversation between the author and Tong Yang-tze, 8th May 2017.